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Translating a culture in stories from the caribbean: a conversation with Olive Senior

Marie-Annick Montout

1 Olive Senior was the guest writer at a conference organized by the University of Angers in 1995. I had then my first opportunity to meet her. We've never lost track of one another since, and when she said that she would be in Paris in May 2008 and would I be there, I rapidly made up my mind that I would. She was going to have a very busy week, but she would squeeze in time for me on the 15th of May. We would meet in the lobby of our hotel at 10 the following day she said. As it were, the lobby proved to be too noisy, and we decided to go up into my room. The interview turned out to be very conversational.

2 Marie-Annick Montout: The seven pieces[1] I chose to translate from your collections of short stories are linked by theme and narrative. They are narrated mainly from the point of view of a character, and report a traumatic event or a long chain of traumatic events in the life of the character which sheds light on his/her present situation and on the way he/she muddles along.

3 Olive Senior: Yes, although the point-of-view character is not always the central one. In 'The View from the Terrace', for instance, although the story is narrated from the point of view of Mr Barton and the woman on the hillside plays a secondary role, she is in fact the focus of Mr Barton's eyes and of the story. For me, this is a story of the past and future engaged in a duel, although I did not think of the story in these terms when I wrote it. But it is also the story of the passing of a colonial elite and the people succeeding them – people living lives of great fragility but who are ultimately triumphant, people like the woman on the hillside. Her future is invested in the children she sends off to school, their clothes clean and pressed every morning. To achieve this takes great ingenuity and also the support of a wider community, something Mr Barton lacks.

4 M-A M. : That woman is a real character, so strong, so much in charge. Her children running to school down the hill year after year. Is this typical?

5 O. S.: Yes, very much so; she is very typical of the way in which poor women have to find the means to raise their children, often with no visible male support.

6 M-A M. : You present Mr Barton via the pronoun *he* for the most part, but also via his family name alternating between telling and showing.

7 O. S. : Well, I was telling the story from Mr Barton's point of view so it seemed natural to use his name or the pronoun 'he'. In other words, it is not Mr Barton telling the story – in which case 'I' would be appropriate – but the author telling the story from Mr Barton's perspective.

8 M-A M.: Most of the above stories end dramatically with the character's failure to find his/her way through and to adequately address the question of mental boundaries between races, cultures and classes. Some of the characters have a stroke or become totally crazy or just disappear from the stage. Looking back would you say that stroke and mental disorder are signs of the character's failure to cross boundaries and to fit into two worlds?

9 O. S. : I think this would be the case for three of the stories under discussion – 'The View from the Terrace', 'The Glass-Bottom Boat' and 'The Chocho Vine' – all of which have protagonists who are elderly and yes, find themselves unable to cope in a rapidly changing environment. But I would also like to emphasize that not all the stories end in tragedy – some characters are triumphant – the wife at the end of 'The Tenantry of Birds', for instance, or the woman in 'The View from the Terrace'. But I do agree that all the characters are challenged by the rapidly changing and complex environments in which they find themselves. Some succeed in making the transition and others are trapped in the moment, by their own rigidity. Their failure is expressed in the stories in physical affliction – I like to think of it as speechlessness or falling into silence. Of course the so-called mad woman in 'You think I mad, Miss?' challenges the stereotype by triumphantly and loudly asserting herself.

10 M-A M.: I see what you mean. I for one think the end of "The View from the terrace"[2] is an indication of Mr. Barton's failure to adapt, of his being no longer interested in watching the woman on the hill. Mr. Barton's interest in life is dead. The values he had always lived by have definitely crumbled down! Now what about Eric in "The Glass-Bottom Boat"?

11 O. S. : Eric has been a victim ever since he was born, of those ineffectual types shaped by his childhood. The irony of the story is that he has left an empowered independent wife for another, seemingly docile woman but then finds himself tied to someone determined to gain empowerment and autonomy. That is just too much for him.

12 M-A M. : The past is quite pregnant in these stories, pervading as it were the characters' present. Present and past appear to blend. Is this the reason why the time difference is not always marked by tense?

13 O. S. : Have you got examples ?

14 M-A M. : Well this one, for instance[3]:

> "Now he realized that the feeling of falling, of having no real centre, had begun long before he had ever met Sybil Pearson. But it was around the time she first came into his life that he had begun to feel frail, like a plant that hadn't been properly rooted. Going home at night to an empty house with his dinner in the oven, he began to get the feeling that his life, his very existence, was so insubstantial that it hardly mattered to any one. Perhaps it had to his mother, but she had died a long time ago."

15 "He began to get the feeling [...]" describes Eric's feeling at the time he was living with his wife. However the feeling is back again because his relationship with Sybil is rapidly rotting and Sybil no longer ever speaks to him. Cases like this one can be quite challenging for a translator.

16 O. S.: I just do what seems right to me at the time. But I do believe that the present is always shaped by the past and so the interweaving of past and present is typical of all my stories.

17 M-A M. : Also, I sometimes find it awkward in the translation process to switch from patwa to West Indian French and to Standard French as if the language continuum were less familiar in French West Indian literature. Do Jamaicans naturally switch from Creole to Standard English?

18 O. S. : Yes, we typically do what the linguists call code-switching. Of course there are some Jamaicans who don't speak patwa or creole at all and some who don't speak standard English. In my work I tend to draw on all the resources of the language so that I am true to the speech of each character. This speech would be indicative of social status, education and so on, as well as the immediate situation in which the language is spoken would determine the code. I use patwa in dialogue but I also sometimes use creole as the language of narration. Here I am navigating between being true to the language and the culture it represents and writing it in such a way that it can be understood by outsiders.

19 M-A M. : I heavily drew on Cassidy's and Le Page's Dictionary of Jamaican English and on your Encyclopaedia of Jamaican Heritage for some expressions. There was nonetheless a quotation I could not find anywhere and this is, "Before A married an' go hug up mango tree, A wi' live so. Me one."

20 O. S. : That phrase is actually from a well known West Indian folk song called 'Mango tree'. The woman is saying that rather than get married and be left at home or abandoned by the man so that she is forced to embrace a mango tree, she will remain single. I guess it's the anthem of the single woman justifying her status by a critique of married life.

21 M-A M. : Finding French equivalents is sometimes quite problematical. "Green bush, green bush" for instance or "Jane and Louisa" and also "Bull inna pen", I had a hard time with those.

22 O. S.: Well you know I have often said I am writing a culture – so my work contains many elements from the folk culture – sayings, songs, games, riddles and so on. 'Green bush, green bush, green bush' is an element of Jamaican folklore – a word charm, said three times[4], to keep wasps away. If stung, you are supposed to grab leaves from the nearest three green bushes to rub on the spot. 'Jane and Louisa' is the name of a very popular ring game played by girls throughout the English speaking Caribbean. It's a courtship game and the chorus is 'Jane and Louisa will soon come home, into the beautiful garden'. 'Bull inna pen' is traditionally a boy's game because it is very rough. A ring is formed, hands are linked tightly and one boy inside the ring (the 'bull') has to charge the ring and break out. Very rough and noisy schoolyard play with spectators cheering.

23 M-A M. : Are you aware that there are correspondences between West Indian French and West Indian English? I can quote *as if* followed by simple present in both languages; *make somebody do something* and "faire quelqu'un faire quelque chose".

24 O. S.: I don't know much about the other creoles but I would not be surprised at the correspondences since there are common African origins which will show in the syntax

and even some of the words. And we tend to forget that in the days of sail there was much more contact on the islands between people of the different language groups than there is today as well as intra-island migration.

25 M-A M. : Caribbean language is a wonderful language. I think of this verse in Derek Walcott's "En Mi-Carême", one of his collection of poems published under the title *In A Green Night* : "and dry palmettos their sea-noise in the breeze". Could it be an allusion to the coconut tree found in the hills and called "coco-la-mer" by French speaking Caribbeans— an allusion to the leaves rubbing against one another?

26 O. S. : I think you are right about the sound of the dry leaves rubbing against one another.

27 Olive and I then went on to talk about Martinique, Guadeloupe, Aimé Césaire who had just died, until we realized it was already 12, and we decided to go for a walk in the Luxembourg gardens and to have lunch there. There was an exhibition of iron sculptures, beached boats and fish traps in the gardens, and we stood contemplating them, feeling drawn closer to the West Indies. We lunched over red snapper, a typical West Indian fish Olive said drawing a blue shawl around her shoulders.

RÉSUMÉS

Interview

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Marie-Annick Montout is a senior lecturer at the University of Angers where she mostly teaches translation. She has passed the Agrégation competition and she has written her thesis on Olive Senior's collections of short stories. She specializes in Caribbean literature in general, and in English Caribbean literature in particular, with an interest in translation strategies for Caribbean texts.